



THE STRANGER WITHIN : TOWARDS A PSYCHODYNAMIC GESTALT PEDAGOGY OF THE SELF

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ABSTRACT

In the following section I will point out some theoretical links between pedagogical Gestalt theory and psychodynamic approaches. I will furthermore give examples for therapeutic and pedagogical techniques that provide opportunities for self-reflection and thus contribute to the development of familiarity with repressed aspects of the self.

KEYWORDS: Gestalt pedagogy, psychoanalytic pedagogy, unfamiliarity, self, refugee crisis, empty chair, scenic understanding

Introduction

Xenophobia and calls for a secure and uniform cultural identity are getting louder in the course of the so-called 'refugee crisis'. Moreover, right-wing violence against asylum seekers has reached a level that has not been present in the social reality of Europe for a long time. Such situations in which "something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality" (Freud 1919, 243) have a special character, according to Freud, which he calls *unheimlich* [*unfamiliar*]¹.

In his eponymous essay, Freud shows that the fearful experience of the unfamiliar – contrary to the obvious assumption – is based less on a lack of familiarity, but rather on suppressed familiarity. Departing from the Freudian concept of the *unfamiliar* I propose to interpret xenophobia and fears of foreign infiltration as expressions of an insufficient confrontation with one's own self. By endeavouring a psychoanalytically informed understanding of the single individual as well as of social collectives, this perspective emphasises the need for a culturally promoted self-awareness: Openness towards strangers and foreigners requires a confrontation with aspects of the otherness in one's own self.

The ego and the foreigner

Freud highlights the privative character of the concept *unheimlich*: "*heimlich* is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*. *Unheimlich* is in some way or other a sub-species of *heimlich*." (Freud 1919, 225)

This etymological aspect Freud is referring to is reflected in a characteristic psychodynamic mechanism: "an uncanny [*unfamiliar*] experience occurs either when infantile complexes which have been repressed are once more revived by some impression, or when primitive beliefs which have been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed." (Freud 1919, 248) According to Freud, what is initially experienced as threateningly foreign in the *unfamiliar*, is actually something *all too familiar*. The nature of the threat, the detrimental, arises from the fact that early stages of the development of the self are differentiated from the more mature, later stages through repression. *Unheimlich* is the threatening relapse into a constitution of the self that we believe to have overcome by long.

The ego, says Freud, is only "a specially differentiated part of the id" (Freud 1923, 37). We owe the ability to distinguish between others and ourselves to a process of differentiation of the self. For Freud, the possibility of reality, rules, norms, and beliefs is not an a priori dimension of the subject, but the result of a complex differentiation of a being that is initially scattered in multiple irrational motivational systems. Only contact with the world and its constant routine – more or less – creates an integrated whole, the ego. Once established the ego becomes – as Lacan (1966, 67) put it – an "armour" for the initially ambivalent and vulnerable self. I hold dear our efforts to tame the raw energies represented by the id; but, as Freud reminds us, the ego that results from them is uncertain and fragile: In this sense, the experience of the *unheimlich* results from a „regression to a time when the ego had not yet marked itself off sharply from the external world and from other people.“ (Freud 1919, 235)

But how are these theoretical remarks on the structure of the self linked to the problem of xenophobia? What exactly does restrain us from experiencing foreignness as something which is simply new, interesting, or at least neutral? What does evoke the idiosyncrasy of the others? Freud's reflections on the uncanny give rise to the following interpretation:

The phenomena of xenophobia and the fear of foreigners should be explained as caused by a structural element rather than with regards to content. It's not that one foreigner or the other that frightens, but rather the confrontation with *otherness as such*. The foreign 'other' sends us back to an inner proximity to the foreignness in our own self: The unfamiliar „is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression.“ (Freud 1919, 240)

At the same time, this familiarity with the repressed has to be masked in order to sustain the necessary illusion of the consolidated ego. Freud emphasises that we tend to *project* our own shortcomings to others: "Whoever possesses something that is at once valuable and fragile [such as the consolidated ego] is afraid of other people's envy, in so far as he projects on to them the envy he would have felt in their place." (Freud 1919, 239, [Note PCL]).

Projection makes the irritation that results from the constitutive insufficiency of identity externally tangible. Accordingly, Žižek points out that idiosyncrasy is based on the perception of a *minimal* difference to the feared and rejected others:

"Although we are ready to accept the Jewish, Arab, Oriental other, there is some detail that bothers us in the West: the way they accentuate a certain word, the way they count money, the way they laugh. This tiny feature renders them aliens, no matter how they try to behave like us." (Žižek 2007, 67)

The insignificance of difference indicates *proximity* to the foreigner or more precisely to *foreignness*. The foreigner is persecuted not because he is different from us to a large extent, but because he can serve as a representative of the repressed *inner* foreignness of ourselves.

As Laplanche once put it, I have tried "to make Freud work" (*faire travailler Freud*) regarding the problem of foreignness in the first section of this paper. I did so in order to reconnect pedagogical *Gestalt study* with its depth psychological base. Laplanche demanded to repeatedly (re)establish psychoanalysis in four ways: clinically, theoretically, outside-the-walls and historically (cf. Laplanche 2011, 40). For Freud, alongside with psychoanalysis, *educating* was one of the impossible professions and "[f]rom all of the applications of psychoanalysis, none has found so much interest, aroused so much hope and as a consequence, drawn upon so many capable employees as the theory and practice of parenting." (Freud 1925, 7f.). Trust and familiarity are concepts which, with the help of depth psychology, should be developed for pedagogy and special pedagogy that is constituted as humanistic and interactionist. In the following section I will therefore try to extend Laplanche's fourfold claim to the field of education.

Familiarity in the unfamiliar – Aspects of analytical Gestalt pedagogy

In the following section I will point out some theoretical links between pedagogical *Gestalt theory* and psychodynamic approaches. I will furthermore give examples for therapeutic and pedagogical techniques that provide opportunities for self-reflection and thus contribute to the development of familiarity with repressed aspects of the self.

Pedagogical *Gestalt theory* 'stands on the shoulders' of depth psychology or, as Bittner (1986, 35) puts it: "[A]ny pedagogy that considers the effectiveness of dynamic unconscious processes is psychoanalytic pedagogy." According to Burow (2001, 1052) there are six essential principles of *Gestalt theoretical pedagogy*: Contact, dialogical relationship, encounter, awareness, the recognition of

one's own contribution in the interaction with others and the willingness to take responsibility (cf. Link 2016, 65). Pedagogical *Gestalt theory* shares with depth psychological approaches the belief that learning, education, and training are essentially means of self-experience. Another common feature of psychoanalytic pedagogy and pedagogical *Gestalt theory* is the idea that the "understanding and dialogical aspect should be understood as an integral part" (Leber 1979, 63) in educational and training processes. Thus, a depth psychologically informed *Gestalt theory* can provide a suitable theoretical background for a pedagogical approach based on reflection and self-reflection (cf. Leber 1972, cf. Leber 1977, 89).

From a Freudian perspective, we can describe the overcoming of pathological repetition in response to foreignness as *working through*: A "reconciliation with the repressed" (Freud 1914, 151) can only take place in an active confrontation with the repressed and unacknowledged aspects of one's self. Not only psychotherapy but also numerous pedagogical fields can provide the right setting for this process. In this respect, and in regard to the problem of foreignness, ubiquitous psychological phenomena such as defence mechanisms, transference and countertransference should be considered, in theory and practice of school-based and out-of-school *Gestalt pedagogy*. I therefore call for a more intense dialogue between psychoanalytical theory and *Gestalt theory*.

The current increase in migration leads to a situation in which contact between natives and immigrants is ubiquitous in educational institutions. This emphasises the importance of a depth psychologically informed approach to pedagogy: The encounter with *the other* (the displaced person) is, as shown above, also an encounter with *one's own otherness* and can provoke an identitarian backlash. Under these circumstances awareness for the unconscious dynamics of the individual and the group are of special importance in educational facilities. As long as no recognition of own foreignness has occurred, the psyche stays caught in the repetition of its defensive attitude based on repression. The closure of borders by European nations may well be a correlate of this psychological mechanism: Whatever threatens one's own identity, must be taken away from (public) awareness. From a Freudian perspective, we can describe the overcoming of pathological repetition in response to foreignness as *working through*: The effect of psychoanalytic therapy does not consist in *fighting* pathological reactions, but in understanding and appreciating their underlying motives. Such "reconciliation with the repressed" (Freud 1914, 151) can only take place in an active confrontation with the repressed and unacknowledged aspects of one's self.

Currently, numerous pedagogical fields of action offer opportunities for encounters with *the foreigner* (the displaced person) on the one hand and *one's own otherness* (self-experience in contact with others) on the other hand. Children learn together in kindergartens or schools. The unconscious dynamics of the individual and the group are especially important in educational facilities. Interwoven with the life biographies and traumatic experiences that exist among some of the participants, the past is important in the present and relevant to the action (cf. Link & Kraus 2015).

"The meaningful integration of material gathered by experience and contained in recollection can be delayed if the subject's capacity for such integration has not been sufficiently developed at the time a certain experience was made." (Weiß 2016, 238, for this, cf. Gerspach 2012, 51)

In a depth psychological account to pedagogy, learning, education, and training becomes self-experience. Pedagogical *gestalt* study shares this moment and other aspects with psychoanalytic pedagogy.

Psychoanalytical Techniques (for professional self-experiences) like *scenic understanding* and *supporting dialogue* can offer opportunities for a *pedagogical working through* based on a *Gestalt* oriented approach. This *working through* strengthens the subject's capacity for self-reflection with regard to inner conflicts. According to Leber the *supporting dialogue* creates a reciprocal tension between *support* (*Halten*) and *demand* (*Zumuten*) in the pedagogical situation (cf. Leber 1991, 55). I understand awareness and understanding of the psychodynamic processes of *transference* and *countertransference* as prerequisites for a *supporting dialogue* with the inner foreigner and the foreign other.

The *scenic understanding* emerged from the psychoanalytic theory of Lorenzer and was further developed by the psychoanalytic educationalist Leber. Lorenzer's aim was to expand classic hermeneutics into a deep hermeneutic cultural analysis by putting *scenes* containing interaction and communication at the centre of his attention. *Scenic understanding* primarily means a technique for a deep hermeneutic interpretation of the clients' narrative. Their latent sense can be developed via the effects of the words on the unconscious of the analyst (König). This is because what is not consciously intended, is staged on a nonverbal level of meaning in the drama of life unfolded in the text. This can be unravelled when one realises the scenic content of this interaction. What can be described as a scenic drama of life unfolded in text (1) is reproduced on the basis of the effect of this practical experience of life in one's own experience, both in the interaction of the researched parties with the text (2) as well as between the researched parties, in assuming *Gestalt* scenes in their group discussions (3). From these, scenes of the practical experience of life objectified in the text and their underlying scenic structure can be reconstructed (cf. König 2001 177-188).

Scenes (be they from childhood or memories of past traumas), as they are perceived in the analytic situation, are not limited to these. It is only there, that the phenomenon was first recognised and addressed in the therapeutic process. Today, this has to be applicable to pedagogy, and this is the intended aim of this article.

Another method originating from *Gestalt therapy* is the monologue technique of the *empty chair*. The technique of the empty chair was first developed by Moreno (Psychodrama) (cf. Hutter & Schwemm 2012, 429; Knittel 2010, 50). In this technique the client is presented an actual empty chair. In dialogue with the therapist, the client presents his representation of the person, emotion or selfposition (with which there is a conflict). Then, he describes feelings, thoughts and bodily sensations to the therapist which he perceives when he imagines the representation of another person on the empty chair. Likewise, the client, for example, could imagine and describe his own position or feeling of xenophobia to the empty chair. He then expresses his holistic perception (body, emotions, thoughts) to the representation on the chair. Together with the therapist, an intersubjective holistic perception takes place and in part, repressed feelings and thoughts are expressed. If the representation relates to a repressed and split part of one's self (or selfposition), it cannot only relate to own feelings and thoughts but also the integration of the split part of one's self, by itself.

The empty chair technique is well suited for clarifying conflict-charged relationships or when preparing for difficult meetings. It is also very good for allowing the client to find out how he feels in contact with the representation of his counterpart. Among other things, Perls has become known for his basic setting of the *hot seat*. That's that empty chair next to the therapist, which enables the client to change seats and occupy a new perspective before an individual, deeper sequence, for example, in group therapy, but also in an individual setting. In contrast, there is the *empty chair* which serves as a projection screen for the client, allowing him to integrate parts of the self which are split off and repressed.

The other person also acts to ensure that the client understands himself better and familiarises himself with his psychic mechanisms better. Therefore, it's not about a direct confrontation with other people, who are not really present and as such, only fantasised. The way in which the client *fantasising* the other person in the empty chair, corresponds to the own internal representations of this person.

As a reflective and explorative way of getting to know one's own positions, it can – with respect to our general approach – be helpful to become familiar with one's inner foreignness.

The monological form of the fantasy interview technique is indicated in therapeutic and educational work if there is a specific, substantive reference to another person. Here, the person always has the function of acting as a focal point of own experience and the client's own feelings. The therapeutic efficacy of this dialogue technique has been demonstrated by Paivio & Greenberg (1995).

Staemmler (2015a), the co-founder of the first Würzburg school of process-theoretical *Gestalt psychotherapy* conceptualises a postmodern image of man in his theory of the *dialogical self*. Staemmler focused on psychotherapeutic practice but his *Gestalt theoretical* approach can provide important insights for pedagogy as well.

"Many psychic processes can be understood as experienced social interactions which the individual has appropriated creatively. The dialogical structure of the individual characterises its psychic functioning. Thereby the individual self is essentially connected to the other and bears the signature of its dialogue: It remains related to the other throughout the lifespan and transforms what it has experienced in contact with others into aspects of its own self." (Staemmler 2015b, 72, for this cf. Koller 2012)².

Encounters with repressed inner foreignness are not limited to psychoanalytic therapy, but are also present in pedagogical settings and require awareness. This is the case not only for those who are subject to education but also for those who are engaged in education. Therefore educators, just like therapists, should be given the opportunity to attend *self-awareness* -, *interview* - and *Balint groups* (Leber 1979, 63).

From a *Gestalt* theoretical perspective pedagogy can and should contribute to the development of familiarity with unacknowledged or unspoken aspects of the self. If clients are offered opportunities for an active engagement with what is repressed in their selfperception they can learn to develop a kind of self-assurance that is not or (not primarily) based on the exclusion of otherness. As such a disposition can only be developed over time, pedagogical techniques like the ones I described above should be integrated in the every day routines of educational processes. Departing from Freud I argued that the experience of strangers as threatening is related to a lack of familiarity with one's own self. Taking this into account, the development of familiarity with the own inner otherness of one's self is essential for an appreciative attitude towards strangers. In the near future European societies will be confronted with the difficult task to integrate a large number of persons with very heterogeneous cultural backgrounds. It goes without saying that this makes the development of an appreciative attitude towards strangers an important task.

A psychoanalytic approach is not only based on logical conclusions, descriptions and the results of empirical studies. It is based on understanding, empathetic, own reactions and a jointly reflected analysis of the expressions of the interaction partners to the perception of scenic arrangement which, for example, refugees try to make with pedagogues (in the form of their earliest experiences). Whether unconscious scenic arrangements are understood and processed also depends on how far the pedagogue can reflect on his personal impact and does not yield to, or unthoughtfully accept the reactions triggered by him, which the other assigns to him in the respective scene. Psychoanalysis is a *hermeneutic science* and not a *classical science*!

The desire for identity

In a broader context, an active engagement with one's own self and one's past can be viewed as a lifelong pedagogical task. We are subject to a continual education and learning process, which, if we accept the challenge, can transform the encounter with the 'other' from threat to enrichment. This applies to the foreign other as well as to the inner other that we find in ourselves.

The current outburst of xenophobia can be seen as a reaction to a confrontation of our society with an unloved part of its very self. Despite all efforts the German commemorative culture, for instance, does not offer immunity against the attractiveness of identitarian political concepts. But it is not enough to point out to the xenophobia of the others. The *unfamiliar*, which overcomes also the authors of this paper in the face of the current political and social climate, should therefore not lead to a detached and uninvolved attitude. We all should rather allow - for our bewilderment - to give rise to an appreciative encounter with our own anxious selves that strive for identity. This quest for identity concerns each and everyone, and as such it becomes a social task. The idea of a *psychodynamic pedagogy of the self* is based on the belief that it is essential to acquire familiarity with the tension between the subjects' desire for identity and the fact that this consolidation of the self can never be fully completed. In order to be able to tolerate the strangeness of the other we have to get to know the stranger within.

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